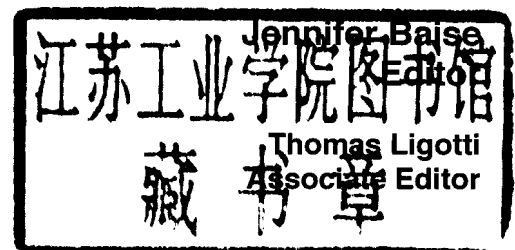


Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 87

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1960,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 76-46132
ISBN 0-7876-2739-9
ISSN 0276-8178

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Preface

Since its inception more than fifteen years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. *TCLC* has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities, and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as *TCLC*. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” *TCLC* “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many libraries would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1960 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of this period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, *TCLC* helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in *TCLC* presents a comprehensive survey of an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of *TCLC* is devoted to literary topics. These topic entries widen the focus of the series from individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, which reprints commentary on authors now living or who have died since 1960. Because of the different periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between *CLC* and *TCLC*. For additional information about *CLC* and Gale's other criticism titles, users should consult the Guide to Gale Literary Criticism Series preceding the title page in this volume.

Coverage

Each volume of *TCLC* is carefully compiled to present:

- criticism of authors, or literary topics, representing a variety of genres and nationalities
- both major and lesser-known writers and literary works of the period
- 6-12 authors or 3-6 topics per volume
- individual entries that survey critical response to each author's work or each topic in literary history, including early criticism to reflect initial reactions; later criticism to represent any rise or decline in reputation; and current retrospective analyses.

Organization of This Book

An author entry consists of the following elements: author heading, biographical and critical introduction, list of principal works, reprints of criticism (each preceded by an annotation and a bibliographic citation), and a bibliography of further reading.

- The **Author Heading** consists of the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. If an author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Also located at the beginning of

the introduction to the author entry are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets.

- The **Biographical and Critical Introduction** outlines the author's life and career, as well as the critical issues surrounding his or her work. References to past volumes of *TCLC* are provided at the beginning of the introduction. Additional sources of information in other biographical and critical reference series published by Gale, including *Short Story Criticism*, *Children's Literature Review*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, and *Something about the Author*, are listed in a box at the end of the entry.
- Some *TCLC* entries include **Portraits** of the author. Entries also may contain reproductions of materials pertinent to an author's career, including manuscript pages, title pages, dust jackets, letters, and drawings, as well as photographs of important people, places, and events in an author's life.
- The **List of Principal Works** is chronological by date of first book publication and identifies the genre of each work. In the case of foreign authors with both foreign-language publications and English translations, the title and date of the first English-language edition are given in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Critical essays are prefaced by **Annotations** providing the reader with information about both the critic and the criticism that follows. Included are the critic's reputation, individual approach to literary criticism, and particular expertise in an author's works. Also noted are the relative importance of a work of criticism, the scope of the essay, and the growth of critical controversy or changes in critical trends regarding an author. In some cases, these annotations cross-reference essays by critics who discuss each other's commentary.
- A complete **Bibliographic Citation** designed to facilitate location of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- Criticism is arranged chronologically in each author entry to provide a perspective on changes in critical evaluation over the years. All titles of works by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type to enable the user to easily locate discussion of particular works. Also for purposes of easier identification, the critic's name and the publication date of the essay are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the journal in which it appeared. Some of the essays in *TCLC* also contain translated material. Unless otherwise noted, translations in brackets are by the editors; translations in parentheses or continuous with the text are by the critic. Publication information (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of works) have been deleted at the editor's discretion to provide smoother reading of the text.
- An annotated list of **Further Reading** appearing at the end of each author entry suggests secondary sources on the author. In some cases it includes essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights.

Cumulative Indexes

- Each volume of *TCLC* contains a cumulative **Author Index** listing all authors who have appeared in Gale's Literary Criticism Series, along with cross references to such biographical series as *Contemporary Authors* and *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. For readers' convenience, a complete list of Gale titles included appears on the first page of the author index. Useful for locating authors within the various series, this index is particularly valuable for those authors who are identified by a certain period but who, because of their death dates, are placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald is found in *TCLC*, yet a writer often associated with him, Ernest Hemingway, is found in *CLC*.

- Each *TCLC* volume includes a cumulative **Nationality Index** which lists all authors who have appeared in *TCLC* volumes, arranged alphabetically under their respective nationalities, as well as Topics volume entries devoted to particular national literatures.
- Each new volume in Gale's Literary Criticism Series includes a cumulative **Topic Index**, which lists all literary topics treated in *NCLC*, *TCLC*, *LC 1400-1800*, and the *CLC* year-book.
- Each new volume of *TCLC*, with the exception of the Topics volumes, includes a **Title Index** listing the titles of all literary works discussed in the volume. In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale has also produced a **Special Paperbound Edition** of the *TCLC* title index. This annual cumulation lists all titles discussed in the series since its inception and is issued with the first volume of *TCLC* published each year. Additional copies of the index are available on request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the following year's cumulation. Titles discussed in the Topics volume entries are not included *TCLC* cumulative index.

Citing Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume in Gale's literary Criticism Series may use the following general forms to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to materials drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books.

¹William H. Slavick, "Going to School to DuBose Heyward," *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined*, (AMS Press, 1987); reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, Vol. 59, ed. Jennifer Gariepy (Detroit: Gale Research, 1995), pp. 94-105.

²George Orwell, "Reflections on Gandhi," *Partisan Review*, 6 (Winter 1949), pp. 85-92; reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, Vol. 59, ed. Jennifer Gariepy (Detroit: Gale Research, 1995), pp. 40-3.

Suggestions Are Welcome

In response to suggestions, several features have been added to *TCLC* since the series began, including annotations to critical essays, a cumulative index to authors in all Gale literary criticism series, entries devoted to criticism on a single work by a major author, more extensive illustrations, and a title index listing all literary works discussed in the series since its inception.

Readers who wish to suggest authors or topics to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to write the editors.

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Allen, Fred, from “Three’s A Crowd,” photograph. Archive Photos, Inc. Reproduced by permission.

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Fred Allen

1894-1956

(Born John Florence Sullivan; also performed as Paul Huckle and Freddy St. James) American humorist

INTRODUCTION

Allen is considered one of the preeminent comedians of America's "Golden Age" of radio humor. His comedy often satirized current events and is noted for exhibiting Allen's wide-ranging intellect and cynicism. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Allen hosted a series of radio programs bearing such names as "The Linit Bath Club Revue," "The Salad Bowl Revue," "The Sal Hepatica Revue," "Hour of Smiles," "Town Hall Tonight," and "The Fred Allen Show," the latter which featured the regular and extremely popular segment "Allen's Alley." The Alley was populated by a host of ethnically diverse characters—including Titus Moody, Senator Beauregard Claghorn, Ajax Cassidy, Mrs. Pansy Nussbaum, and Falstaff Openshaw—who commented on contemporary topics in their respective dialects. For example, Senator Claghorn's character as voiced by Kenny Delmar—who also provided the voice for Warner Brothers's animated Looney Tune character, Foghorn Leghorn—lampooned the bombastic and corrupt nature and double-speak of Southern politicians during the era of Louisiana Governor Huey Long. Allen's long-running mock feud with fellow comic Jack Benny gave rise to some of the era's most barbed and caustic humor, and Allen became known for the quick wit exhibited in the comebacks, asides, and rejoinders he directed toward his violin-toting, penurious nemesis.

Biographical Information

Allen was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His father was a bookbinder, and his mother died when he was three. He attended Boston High School of Commerce and worked nights at the Boston Public Library. Inspired by reading books on the nature of comedy, Allen taught himself ventriloquism and juggling. An ecstatic audience response to his stage act at the library Christmas show prompted Allen to pursue comedy on a full-time basis. He adopted the name Paul Huckle, European Entertainer, after graduating from high school in 1911, and sought work as a vaudeville comedian. His talents as a juggler, however, were limited, and Allen changed his stage name to Freddy St. James and billed himself as "The World's Worst Juggler." As the latter, Allen would display his ineptness as a juggler, a fact he reinforced with a self-deprecating monologue. In 1916, Allen toured New Zealand and Australia, where he honed his stage act. He returned to the United States, calling himself Fred Allen, and attained critical and



commercial success for his appearances at New York's Broadway Palace Theater, as well as in the revues *The Passing Show of 1922*, *The Greenwich Village Follies* and *The Little Show* in 1929, as well as *Three's a Crowd* (1930). In 1932, Allen hosted "The Linit Bath Club Revue" half-hour radio program with his wife and co-star Portland Hoffa. Of the next two programs hosted by Allen, "The Salad Bowl Revue," and "The Sal Hepatica Revue," the latter evolved into "Hour of Smiles," and eventually "Town Hall Tonight." The program, renamed "The Fred Allen Show," consistently attracted a large number of listeners throughout the next eight years, an audience that swelled with the growing popularity of "Allen's Alley" in the 1940s. For this show, Allen also assembled The Mighty Allen Art Players, which included Kenny Delmar, Alan Reed (later the voice of Hanna Barbera's animated Fred Flintstone), Minerva Pious, and Peter Donald. This troupe created topical humor with such parodies as One Long Pan, the Oriental detective based on Charlie Chan, and "The Radio Mikado," which borrowed heavily from Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta *The Mikado* to skewer radio and advertising executives. In other episodes,

the Art Players lampooned both the Brooklyn Dodgers and Gilbert and Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore*, and a parody of Rodgers and Hammersteins's *Oklahoma!* called "Picadilly!" As the 1940s drew to a close and game shows and television became the more prominent entertainment medium, Allen's radio audience declined, and his program was cancelled in 1949. Allen suffered a heart attack in 1952 as he was preparing to launch his own television program, relegating him to perform in his own sparsely-viewed television special and guest-star on several other stars's television shows. He described his appearance on television as "not videogenic. After my only video appearance I received fan mail from three undertakers." He eventually became a panelist on the game show "What's My Line?" a position he held until his death in 1956.

Major Works

Allen's humor is noted for its reliance on sarcasm, cynicism, and a scathingly intelligent wit, which he delivered with a nasal whine in a deadpan fashion. Allen also perfected a very sharp style of insult; he once questioned a particularly aggressive foe: "Did your parents ever consider birth control?" Most critics agree Allen was at his best when he performed with Jack Benny. The feud between Allen and Benny ensured high listening ratings, and prompted a series of films starring the duo, including *Love Thy Neighbor*. Allen also perfected the double-entendre as a means of getting his jokes past the network censors, and employed hyperbolic metaphors to describe people to humorous effect. Allen published *Treadmill to Oblivion* (1954), which recounts his early years in radio and includes some of his most famous humor, and an autobiography, *Much Ado about Me* (1956). His *Letters* (1965) were published posthumously, and include correspondence with such comics as Jack Benny and Groucho Marx.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Treadmill to Oblivion (memoirs) 1954
Much Ado about Me (autobiography) 1956
Letters (letters) 1965

CRITICISM

Maurice Zolotow (essay date 1944)

SOURCE: "Fred Allen: Strickly from Misery (with a rebuttal by Mr. Allen)," in *These Were Our Years: A Panoramic and Nostalgic Look at American Life between the Two World Wars*, edited by Frank Brookhouser, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959, pp. 486-94.

[In the following essay, originally published in 1944, Zolotow offers personal observations of Allen, to which Allen himself replies in footnotes.]

NOTE: Fred Allen read this chapter on himself. His observations are printed, exactly as he wrote them, in the footnotes. Mr. Allen does not like capital letters.

Unlike some comedians who are lifelong victims of a self-hatred implanted when they were young and who are compelled to devote their humor to ridiculing themselves, Fred Allen has always poured out his bitterness and his scorn upon the world. For a long time he was a successful radio star, earning plenty of money, with a nice wife with whom he lived in comfortable circumstances. This did not prevent him from finding his environment a veritable chamber of horrors. "Eventually," he once told a researcher for *Time* magazine, "I have high hopes I'll be able to withdraw from the human race."

For about twenty years, Allen has been complaining about sponsors, radio vice-presidents, the stupid public and other facets of life in these United States. The United States had turned the other cheek to his complaints and showered fame and wealth upon him. But finally, beginning in 1946, the environment really turned on Fred. The jackpot shows brought about his ruination in radio. He had had a high Hooper rating when "Stop The Music" started in opposition to him. "Stop The Music" offered a fantastic series of prizes to anybody who, upon being telephoned, could correctly identify the title of a "mystery melody." The prizes—which included trips to Hawaii, wardrobes, mink coats, silver flatware, automobiles—often had a value as high as \$30,000. Unable to compete with Santa Claus, Allen saw his rating drop, drop, drop. He lost millions of listeners. During the 1947-48 season, he dropped from his traditional position in the first ten of radio to number 38.

When he returned with his Allen's Alley characters in October, 1948, he announced that the National Surety Company had written a bond to cover any listener who might be called by "Stop The Music" but who couldn't supply the melody because he was busy listening to the Allen show. Any such victim of the urge to be entertained would receive \$5,000. This didn't help. Then Fred started satirizing give-aways. He put on a sketch entitled "Cease The Melody," which offered the winner eight hundred pounds of putty for every member of the family; four thousand yards of dental floss, almost new; an RCA Victor television set, complete with saloon and bartender; twelve miles of railroad track; and, for the jackpot, a real live human being! Nothing helped. In 1949, radio's greatest social satirist withdrew in defeat.

Then in 1950 Allen made two sorties into television—both shows fell flat. Allen retired on his favorite excuse of high blood pressure. Now he appears as a guest on Tallulah Bankhead's Big Show and other programs.

His views on television and radio have always been caustic. Before trying television, he had already told Joe McCarthy, "Television is nothing like vaudeville. In vaudeville you had one act and a constantly changing audience. You used a routine in Philadelphia one week and you used it again in Wilkes-Barre the next week. You could work it into a state of perfection. TV, like radio, is just the opposite. You have the same audience all the time, so the act must be changed after each performance. Naturally, the quality of the material gets low." Pointing out that the television screen was too tiny to register subtleties, he said, "The only way you can register mild disapproval on TV is to hit somebody over the head with a broom." The studio audiences he describes as "hordes of cackling geese . . . Would anybody with a brain be caught dead in a studio audience? Would anybody with a sense of taste stand in line to watch half a dozen people in business suits and tortoise-shell glasses standing around reading into microphones off pieces of paper?"

This is a story which has been told about many great comedians and it is also told about Allen. A man went to a doctor. The man complained of sleeplessness, loss of appetite and general irritability. The doctor put him through the paces of a complete physical check-up and he found nothing wrong. He finally advised his patient to learn to smile and relax, to have a good time. He told him to visit the Music Box Theatre and see Fred Allen in *The Little Show*, then Broadway's smash comedy. He said that this man Allen would snap anybody out of the doleful doldrums. He said his prescription was a visit to the Allen show every night for a week. The man said, "But I can't do this."

The doctor wanted to know why not. "You see," replied the patient desperately, his sad face deepening. "I *am* Fred Allen."¹

This tale may be apocryphal, but it illuminates a fact. Fred Allen, who used to receive \$4,000 a week² for making twenty million radio listeners laugh, is himself amused by very little in the world. He is a morbid gentleman who wears a perpetual air of having just finished sucking on a particularly bitter lemon.

Allen is not unhandsome. He is five feet eleven inches tall, and weighs a tidy one hundred eighty two pounds, which is mainly muscle. He has a lithe figure and is quick on his toes. He works out at a YMCA gymnasium once a week, doing some light calisthenics, playing handball and casually sparring. He is a fine amateur boxer and has mastered a very deceptive left hook. But when he is in his usual mood of misery and dejection, Allen contorts his long, egg-shaped head,³ curls his lips, squints his eyes, wrinkles up his face and takes on the combined expressions of Dracula, Fu Manchu and The Phantom of the Opera. The fascinated spectator sees only the enormous pouches under the comedian's eyes—pouches large enough to contain a good-sized kangaroo baby.⁴ And yet, actually, Allen, in a relaxed and genial

moment, is dapper and good-looking, resembling the suave ex-mayor, Jimmy Walker.

Allen speaks in a slow drawl, slurring his words, speaking through his nose with a pronounced twang. He cannot help saying clever things. His larynx manufactures humor⁵ as effortlessly and naturally as the human liver secretes bile. And the words Allen discharges are original and imaginative discharges of hostility through the linguistic zone. He has inherited the Irish gift of blarney, the gift of clothing an idea in picturesque language. The eyes are also Irish—they are ice-blue eyes, but they are not smiling Irish eyes.⁶ They glance about restlessly, taking in everything, blinking often. Allen has many nervous tics—the eyes blinking,⁷ the fingers, long and spatulate, rubbing the tip of his nose or massaging the lobes of his ears. When he smiles, perhaps once every two or three hours, it is a grim smile.

Some of Allen's friends suspect his perpetual despondency is a pose. "Fred is never happy unless he's grouching about something," one of them says. On the other hand, to Allen his hostility is a logical reaction to frustration that surrounds him on every side.

He loves to smoke; he used to smoke fifteen cigars a day, and chew tobacco in between cigars. His doctors have made him cut out smoking. He says he has acute hypertension, with his blood pressure reading as high as 207.⁸

Allen likes to eat spicy Italian dishes, lobster Cantonese, thick juicy steaks, shrimp à la Newburg. His doctors—who include naturopaths as well as the orthodox kind—have forbidden him to touch shellfish, red meat, salt, pepper, coffee or tea. His diet consists mainly of salads and whole-wheat bread.⁹ The food is washed down with beakers of buttermilk, a beverage he despises.

"You finally get to do so well in your career, all you can drink is buttermilk," he once remarked to me. "When they start feeding me intravenously, I'll know I've really arrived at the top."

Allen dislikes mixing with people, yet he must attend conferences, socialize with prospective sponsors, pose for photographs, be interviewed. He likes to be alone and read books, but the pressure of creating thousands of new and hilarious words¹⁰ every time he goes on the air doesn't give him time to read more than a few pages a day.

Radio is a repugnant medium of entertainment¹¹ in his opinion and TV is worse. Allen says the reason they call television a *medium* is because nothing is well done on it. Yet he must appear several times a month on various programs. "Radio comedy," he drawls, "is the most painful form of entertaining. Every week you've got to be there with a new set of gags. When they invented radio, they should also have invented a mechanical robot to turn out new gags. You can't copyright a joke. And this pressure for new ideas drives every comedian on the air into becoming a vulture. I don't blame them.

I blame their gag writers.¹² You can't tell a new joke on the radio without hearing it in almost the same version on almost every other comedy show during the week." Allen, the wittiest¹³ and most creative of radio comedians, suffers more than any other wag.

Allen doesn't like studio audiences.¹⁴ So whenever he appears there is always a studio filled with spectators. The theory is that a background of laughter and applause is necessary; otherwise the jokes would sound hollow to the persons listening at home. Eddie Cantor was the first to insist on audiences for his broadcast. Many comedians feel that their timing goes off without an immediate audience reaction. In addition, many of them probably require the approval of an audience to sustain their self-confidence. But Allen's self is organized on a basis of presumed hostility from others and therefore he has no use for any audience. "Did you ever buy a phonograph record with applause?" he inquires.

He claims the audience laughs waste precious minutes. In addition, a radio comedian must insert "sight gags," like tearing his hair, lifting up a trouser leg, to get laughs from the studio audience. These are lost on the home listeners. To get a yak¹⁵ from New York studio audiences he had to insert local gags about Mayor Impellitteri or Leo Durocher. "Who cares about Impy in Medicine Hat, North Dakota?"¹⁶ Allen asks.

Allen feels uncomfortable with advertising agencies. So for years he has been employed by various agencies. Allen once described an agency as 85 per cent confusion and 15 per cent commission. The jargon of agency men and their tight-lipped¹⁷ attitude to life bewilders him. Once he wanted to do a sketch based on the "call for Philip Morris" slogan. He planned to have a voice cry into the mike, "Call for Philip Morris . . . Call for Philip Morris." And another voice would say, "Who wants him?" And the first voice replies, "Draft board 68—his number came up." The agency handling Allen's shows at the time wanted to revise the gag slightly. They were handling a rival cigarette and they asked Allen to change his script, so it read, "Call for Lucky Strikes . . . Call for Lucky Strikes." Wouldn't hurt the point a bit, they insisted.

As for radio and TV, Allen calls it hag-ridden by red tape, bureaucracy, nepotism, buck passing and ignorance of the fundamentals of show business. He defines a conference of radio executives as a meeting at which a group of men who, singly, can do nothing, agree collectively that nothing can be done. Vice-presidents he particularly loathes.¹⁸ On his program he used to introduce such NBC executives as the vice-president in charge of leaky Dixie cups, the vice-president in charge of uh-uh, and the vice-president in charge of Don't Raise That Window Another Inch. Actually, the networks have given him a lot of leeway.¹⁹

Allen can't stand Hollywood—so he is intermittently going out to the coast to make a movie, which invariably flops. Among his observations on the movie capital are

these gems: "Hollywood is a place where people from Iowa mistake each other for stars." "In Hollywood, the girls have false hair, teeth and calves on their legs. The men have their shoulders built up and wear toupees. So when two stars make love on the screen, it's a lot of commodities getting together." "California is a wonderful place to live—if you're an orange." "An associate producer is the only guy in Hollywood who will associate with a producer."

Allen's sarcastic drive refuses to respect any person, any institution—and therefore he has always been embroiled with radio censors. "A radio censor," he once explained, "is a man who comes into his office every morning and finds a molehill on his desk. His job is to build that molehill into a mountain before he goes home."

Once he threw in a line that ran, "I knew Ebbets Field was haunted when that old bat spoke to me." This was censored because the censor thought the remark might be interpreted as a slur on American motherhood. Another time, a lady²⁰ who had just been promoted to censoring, noticed the word "segue" repeated several times in an Allen script. "Segue" is a standard cue in show business; it means "glide into" the next bit of dialogue or music. The lady thought "segue" had immoral overtones. She expurgated all the "segues" in the script. "Nobody," Allen recalls bitterly, "was going to segue on the National Broadcasting Company as long as *she* was around, she said. She would see to *that*!"

Once, on CBS, there was a line in the script, reading, "They'll bring it through, come hell or high water." Fred turned to a CBS censor and asked, "Can we get a clearance on high water?"

Censoring Allen, however, is not final. He has a mischievous tongue and is the fastest ad-lib gagster in the business.²¹ His sponsors have always trembled at the spontaneous and dangerous gags he may pull which aren't written on paper. Once when Bristol-Myers was paying his salary, he made a biting reference to Scottish thrift, and two hundred Scotsmen in Pittsburgh²² signed an indignant letter stating they would never use Sal Hepatica again.

"The prospect that they would go through life constipated so frightened the agency that they made me apologize," Allen says.

Another time, he ridiculed the American Meat Institute for hiring Edgar Guest to write inspirational poems about meat. Armour & Company²³ promptly threatened they would stop using Texaco products in their trucks. When he told about a student pharmacist who failed to get his degree because "he flunked in chow mein," the American druggists descended on him like a swarm of wasps. Speaking of Philadelphia, Allen said he once checked into a hotel there and the rooms were so small even the mice were hunch-backed. Allen was publicly denounced as a vile rascal by the Philadelphia Chamber

of Commerce, the Convention & Tourist Committee, and the All Philadelphia Citizens Committee.²⁴ The *Public Ledger* attacked him in an editorial, headed PHILADELPHIA FIGHTS BACK. Allen replied as follows:

dr. editor,

the remarks made on my program concerned a small theatrical hotel in phila. twenty-five years ago. no mention was made on my program and no aspersions cast on the many excellent hotels in phila. today. i know that the benjamin franklin hotel is so named because you can fly a kite in any room. i know that the rooms at the walton are so large the world's fair is stopping there when it goes on the road next fall. i know that the rooms at the bellevue-stratford are so spacious that the army-navy game can be played in a closet. and i know that billy rose rehearsed his aquacade in a sink in one of mr. lamaze's mastodonic rooms at the warwick.

yrs., fred allen.

Secretly, Allen is pleased by all the hubbub he occasionally stirs up. He likes to think of a comedian not merely as a clown in cap and bells, but as a critic of current folly²⁵ who is an effective influence on his contemporaries. He thinks the sheer quantity of machine-made comedy pouring out of the radio night after night tends to dull the average person's responses. "Before radio, when a Will Rogers or a Peter Finley Dunne made a wisecrack it would be quoted from one end of the country to the other, and everyone repeated it for a month," he says. "Today, nobody remembers what I²⁶ said on the radio last week, except some gag writers who are figuring ways to steal the jokes. Everything on radio and television is as fleeting as a butterfly's f—t."

To Allen, creating comedy is a serious affair. He has collected and studied over four thousand humorous books and he has read every biography of anybody he considers a humorist—whether it's Mark Twain, Eugene Field or Charles Dickens. He has a good mind and a good memory. When I asked him to sum up his attitude toward life, he said, "Life is an unprofitable episode that disturbs an otherwise blessed state of nonexistence." Then he paused and added slowly, "That's from Nietzsche." He sees most human beings around him as troubled, tired, frustrated, confused. "They're in life's dead storage, the parking lot of humanity," he mutters. Once he saw a small boy dart in front of a truck. Allen quickly moved out and pulled the boy to safety. Then he snarled at him, "What's the matter, kid? Don't you want to grow up and have troubles?"

NOTES

¹ this couldn't have happened to me. i go to a chiropractor. during my adjustments i lie face down. the chiropractor doesn't know who i am. if he did ask me a question, my face is buried in the table. my answer would be muffled.

² mr. zolotow doesn't mention the specific week this amount was earned. you can learn my salary by writing my sponsor. if you are a sadist, and you want to know what i have left, write mr. j. h. snyder.

³ in the preceding paragraph i was "not unhandsome." here i have an egg-shaped head. as beauty goes mr. z. must use salvador dali standards. if my head was eggshaped i would use a nest for a pillow. i don't.

⁴ my bags aren't that big. my eyes look as though they are peeping over two dirty ping pong balls.

⁵ humor originates in the brain. it is dispensed through the mouth. the larynx is only the middle man.

⁶ the author of this is no smiling irishman.

⁷ this is not nervousness. i have too much iron in my blood. my eyelids keep falling-down.

⁸ mr. z. has my blood pressure confused with my salary. day to day systolic and diastolic readings will be forwarded upon receipt of a three-cent stamp.

⁹ m. z. obviously had this diet left over from an old peter rabbit interview.

¹⁰ there are no new words. i try to use the old words in new combinations.

¹¹ i didn't say repugnant. radio is a giant gimmick that demands new material in mass production quantities. for the creative artist, radio is a form of drudgery.

¹² the average radio gag writer is an emaciated nonentity with a good memory and a pencil.

¹³ jack benny and his relatives will resent this.

¹⁴ i have nothing against these people individually. if they didn't collect in radio studios i might think highly of them.

¹⁵ for mr. z's information a yak is a gamey quadruped found in zoos and crossword puzzles. a laugh, in radio parlance, is a yuck.

¹⁶ medicine hat is in alberta, canada. moving a canadian city into the u.s. may give the impression that the marshall plan is back-firing.

¹⁷ far from being tight-lipped most agency men are big-mouthed. the only tight-lipped men in radio are oboe players.

¹⁸ the average vice-president is a form of executive fungus that attaches itself to a desk. on a boat this growth would be called a barnacle.

¹⁹ a network won't give you the right time. they let bulova do it and charge him for the privilege.

²⁰ this lady is no longer a censor. she walked into a mirror, one day, came to herself, and quit the whole business.

²¹ bob hope and his relatives will resent this.

²² it was philadelphia where the movement was abandoned.

²³ toujours l'armour. but not in this instance. the meat concern was swift & co.

²⁴ philadelphia was bidding for the republican convention that year. the various local organizations thought the republicans might feel there wasn't a room in philadelphia large enough to hold the elephant.

²⁵ in bygone days ridicule was known to hamper folly. today the world is upside down and exponents of folly outrank disciples of ridicule.

²⁶ or anybody else.

Steve Allen (essay date 1956)

SOURCE: "Fred Allen," in *The Funny Men*, Simon and Schuster, 1956, pp. 34-59.

[In the following essay, Allen—a noted comedian and television host and no relation to Fred Allen—reminisces about Allen, his career in radio, and the reasons behind his failure to adapt his comic style to television.]

St. Patrick's Day 1956 was one I shall not soon forget. The day before—Friday, March 16—New York was hit by an unseasonal blizzard and on Saturday the city's Irish paraded through snow and bitter cold. One elderly Irishman that night took a stroll from which he never returned. About the time he was putting on his overcoat to go out I was sitting in a room on the twelfth floor of the Waldorf-Astoria with Sid Caesar and several members of his staff. We had just come upstairs after attending the annual award ceremonies of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences and were enjoying a social drink while discussing that favorite conversational topic of all comedians: comedy.

Sid told a few funny stories about his experiences in Europe, and then somehow the conversation got around to Fred Allen, as it often does when professional humorists get together. Sid recalled how impressed he was one day several years before when Fred had dropped into his theater at rehearsal time. "It was really something," he said. "Here was this guy I had listened to on the old Majestic all through my childhood years, this guy who seemed like God or somebody, and all of a sudden there he was hanging around my theater."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"Oh, just talked for a while. It was the day Truman was going through town in some big parade or something. I remember we went outside to watch him go by, and after he'd passed I said, 'Harry looks a little like he's sick,' and Fred said, 'Doesn't surprise me. He probably caught it from the country.'"

When Jayne and I left the Waldorf we drove Carl Reiner and his wife to their garage, and as we stopped for a red light at the corner of 57th Street and Seventh Avenue we saw Sylvia and Leonard Lyons. Since cabs were at a premium, we offered them a lift, and as they climbed into the car Jayne noticed that Sylvia seemed shaken. It was then that Leonard told us that Fred Allen had just died. Leonard had identified the body, and to him had fallen the grim task of telling Portland the sad news.

The following day *What's My Line?* called me and asked me to fill in for Fred. Portland had vetoed replacement of the regular format with a special tribute and had suggested instead that the program, in show-business tradition, go on as usual. At the conclusion of the show that evening I said something that still expresses better than any other words I might now create what I felt at Fred's passing: "A few months ago Fred read a postcard here on the show, a card asking, 'Is Fred Allen Steve Allen's father?' Fred laughed and explained that the answer was no. But last night when I heard of his death I couldn't have been more deeply affected if the answer had been yes."

The next day, Monday, Bennett Cerf, Howard Deitz, Bob Hope, Kenny Delmar, Peter Donald, John Crosby, Herman Wouk and Jack Benny gathered on my late-night program to pay tribute to Fred, to tell of their love and respect for him and, oddly enough at such a sad time, to laugh heartily at his remembered jokes. I remembered thinking during that program what a peculiar thing it was that such a vast talent as Fred's had gone largely unhonored by television. Consider, for a moment, the background.

The opinion seems to be popular that the entertainment field is at all times vastly overstocked with talented people and that, therefore, only a select few can get to the top, while the rest must inevitably wend their broken way into obscurity.

Like a great many popular opinions, this one is composed of one part truth and nine parts nonsense. There is only one branch of show business that honestly appears to have more talent than can ever possibly be accommodated: the song-writing field. There are millions of people around who can write a pretty fair song in whole or in part, but the market for popular music in this country is so restricted that a stable of five or six competent tunesmiths could easily satisfy the entire normal demand.

The illusion that there are too many talented performers in the other areas of the entertainment world is created

by the great deal of hustle and bustle in agency offices, endless union membership lists and cutthroat competition for available work. True, indeed, there are too many people looking for work as clarinet players, tap dancers, acrobats and singers, but the brutal fact of the matter is that a strikingly small minority of these ambitious entertainers have anything more than run-of-the-mill ability.

In fact, it is the very paucity of genius that explains why a good many artistically impoverished individuals achieve success anyway. There are simply so many motion pictures to be made, so many plays to be produced, so many orchestras to put together, so many broadcasts to be aired, and if there is not enough real talent to go around, why then it is the most natural thing in the world that the fates should say to a few fortunate folk, "You have not really enough ability to be a star, but we are casting around for a star today, so you'll do until the real thing comes along."

Which makes me remember the story of an actor who went to his psychiatrist. "Doctor," he said, "you've got to help me. I have no talent, I can't sing on key, I can't dance, I don't tell funny stories and I'm not handsome. What would you suggest?"

"Why, the solution is simplicity itself," said the doctor. "You've got to get out of show business."

"But I can't," the actor said. "I'm a star!"

Granted, then, that success is not always predicated upon ability, is it nevertheless true that a great many unrecognized talents are doomed to mill forever with the unheralded throng simply because of the strangling competition? As they used to say in the Army, that's a good question. The answer to it is "No!"

There is a period through which every successful entertainer suffers and during which his innate or acquired talent is nurtured and developed until it matures to the point where it demands recognition. But the idea that the woods are full of people who could sing just as well as Bing Crosby if someone would only give them the chance, or people who could act rings around Marlon Brando if some producer would only audition them, is extremely unrealistic.

All right. We've established there are really too many talented song writers. At the opposite end of the chart explaining supply-and-demand relationships you'll find the word *comedians*. There are really not enough of these, believe it or not. If every big singer in the country retired tomorrow you'd have a new crop of kids ready to fill their shoes within two years. But if all the top-bracket funnymen in the business were taken away from us, it would be a long time before the pain of their loss would be eased.

Hollywood can find plenty of collar-ad faces to throw upon its screens, the record industry will always come

up with at least acceptable voices, casting directors can thumb through card indexes for various sorts of talents, but only the comedian is in such demand that he can almost name his own price in the hectic entertainment market. There are thousands of singers, dancers, magicians and actors swarming in and out of theaters and broadcasting studios, but almost the entire job of making America laugh is handled by a small group of some thirty men.

Thus it is particularly puzzling that one of this select group, and the one, indeed, that was considered by many authorities to be the group's leading wit, was, so far as television is concerned, more or less out of work, partly retired to the status of great-white-father-grand-old-man of contemporary comedy.

You almost get angry at the whole medium, wondering why it couldn't seem to accommodate a man who could say of California, "It's a great place to live, if you're an orange."

Television needed a man who could say of Georgie Jessel, "Georgie loves after-dinner speaking so much he starts a speech at the mere sight of bread crumbs."

When the price of milk in New York City rose to twenty-two cents a quart it was Fred who said, "Milk hasn't been so high since the cow jumped over the moon."

In Lindy's one night Leonard Lyons heard Oscar Levant ask, "Fred, are you an egomaniac?" "No, Oscar," Fred replied. "I've heard that the meek shall inherit the earth and I'm standing by to collect."

Although he may have just been going for a joke in response to Oscar's question, Fred spoke the truth about himself. He was the meekest, the least phony of all the famous performers I've met. He never publicly associated himself with any charity, but he was the most charitable man I've known. But a lot of wealthy men give money; Fred gave *himself* in addition—his time and his talent. He came through for a lot of us. Dave Garroway and Henry Morgan found Fred in their corners during the early days of their struggle for recognition. Herb Shriner was suggested by Fred to replace him when his first heart attack forced him to withdraw from *Two for the Money*. Red Skelton says it was Fred who wrote Red's famous Guzzler's Gin routine. I will always be grateful to Fred for appearing on a special *Tonight* broadcast celebrating the opening of *The Benny Goodman Story*. We were stuck for a big-name star to open the show. When we told Fred our problem he agreed on the spot to step in. And he was in great form that night. It was to be his last big monologue.

So what about Fred and television? Where did the trouble lie? I think the fault was neither Fred's nor TV's. It was just one of those things. Fred's greatest work was behind him, after all, and though he was

brilliantly witty to his last day, he was ill at ease before the camera. *What's My Line?* gave him at best openings for only two or three jokes per broadcast. None of his classically witty prepared material could be brought to the panel table since the show is unrehearsed and ad-libbed, and although he was a master of the off-the-cuff chatter, he was always somewhat distracted by the mechanics of the game itself. Now and then, of course, he would score strongly. One night, speaking to a shoemaker who mentioned the name of Gino Prato, Fred said, "I wish you'd tell Gino to hurry back from Europe. He's got a pair of my shoes locked in his store." But most of the laughs on *What's My Line?* came from the confusion of the panelists and the double-meanings that often stem from their ignorance of the professions they are trying to identify. The Fred Allen of *What's My Line?* was not the *real* Fred Allen. It was true that, as Madison Avenue parlance has it, he hadn't "found himself" in television.

This search for one's self in the TV jungles can be a pretty frightening thing, too. When CBS first brought me from Hollywood to New York there were regular executive sessions devoted to "finding the real Steve Allen." I had been conducting a well-received radio show five nights a week on station KNX, and it was presumably the success of this program that induced the network to transfer me to its eastern headquarters. But as soon as I arrived in town there began a search for the "real" me. I became so wary of the mechanics of this probe that I eventually began to fancy that I was being followed through the halls of 485 Madison Avenue by vice-presidents with pith helmets and butterfly nets.

Poor Fred had gone through the same sort of thing for about four years. But he was philosophical about it. Lunching with John Crosby one day at the Plaza, he smiled amiably to a lady who had nodded a greeting from across the room. "I have to be very careful," he said. "My public has shrunk to such an extent that I have to be polite to all of them. I even say hello to people in sewers. You know, I went off the air once before, back in 1944. We got three letters deploring it. This time we're way ahead of that: I think we got fifteen."

From the beginning, oddly enough, even way back before he had to work in the medium, Fred had cast a suspicious eye at television. "When you see Kukla, Fran, and Ollie come alive on that little screen, you realize you don't need great big things as we had in radio. They ought to get one of those African fellows over here to shrink all the actors. We're all too big for this medium."

"TV," he said, "gets tiresome. Take *The Goldbergs*, which has been so well received. It's a good show, but it gets so after you see it four or five times you know what the uncle is going to do and you know what the kids are going to do. The trouble with television is it's *too* graphic. In radio, a moron could visualize things his way; an intelligent man, his way.

"Everything is for the eye these days—TV, *Life*, *Look*, the movies. Nothing is for just the mind. The next generation will have eyeballs as big as cantaloupes and no brain at all."

Of all the prominent comedians, Allen most closely approached the status of a philosopher. Since a philosopher must, by the very nature of his mission, be a critic it follows that Fred's was comedy with a heavy critical content. For some as yet unidentified reason television is the first medium in history not only to put a low price on critical humor but practically to exclude it altogether.

The theater, the press, the lecture platform, radio—all accommodated pungent satire, all were successfully used as bases from which to fire the barbed comic shaft. Television, possibly because of its complete sensual intimacy, possibly because it is a medium wherein a picture may detract from, rather than add to, an idea, has placed the sardonic humorist in an awkward position.

Some thought had been given, therefore, to "softening up" Allen's comedic style. There had been attempts to make him what the trade refers to as "gracious and warm." Such efforts were, naturally, doomed to failure, if only on an old-dog-new-tricks basis. Fred was, after all, the king of radio comedy, and kings are notoriously opposed to change, particularly of a personal nature. Besides, one cannot help feeling that Fred really shouldn't have been asked to modify his professional personality. He had never had to sell "himself" before; he had simply presented amusing ideas. It is audiences, perhaps, who should be asked to change. How dare they, one is tempted to demand, not enjoy the work of a man who brought them so much pleasure on the radio?

Fred's bitterness was a pose and a disguise anyway. Its existence was real enough, but it was a camouflage for his true personality, which *was* gracious and warm. Unlike some performers who are angels to the public and devils to their associates, he exposed his Mephistophelean side to his public and worked his good deeds in the anonymity of his daily routine. While he was an outspoken individualist and a man of many dislikes, he was an eminently enjoyable companion and a top-notch conversationalist. Modest, soft-spoken, without a trace of phoniness, he was also privately known as a push-over for anybody in need of a handout. Friends say he had one of the longest "pension" lists in show business. Almost every successful performer has a small and usually vocal circle of people who choose to be identified as enemies; I have never heard anyone say a word against Fred Allen.

Mark Goodson, who with his partner Bill Todman produces such shows as *What's My Line?*, *I've Got a Secret*, *Two for the Money* (which was originally created for Fred), and Fred's *Judge for Yourself*, had this to say about Allen's personality: "Fred is a complete paradox. On the air he can't function unless he's holding something